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# Violence against Prostitutes

## Findings of Research in the Spanish–Portuguese Frontier Region

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**ABSTRACT** Violence has long been assumed to be an intrinsic trait of female prostitution. However, it has been mostly associated with the locale in which the activity is exercised, i.e. with working time and space. In this article, based on data gathered by direct observations, in-depth interviews and the compilation of so-called time-budgets, the authors demonstrate that violence is as pervasive and omnipresent a feature of prostitutes' ostensibly private 'off-duty' (non-working) time and space, though it takes on varied and distinct forms and configurations, compared to violence in the workplace.

**KEY WORDS** female prostitutes ♦ indoor-prostitution ♦ 'off-duty' forms and expressions of violence

Sex workers are particularly vulnerable to violence. (Alexander, 2001: 20)

### INTRODUCTION

The reflections presented in this article<sup>1</sup> bring together some of the results of an ongoing project that began in January 2001, titled 'Female Prostitution in Frontier Regions'.<sup>2</sup> The geographical focus of the project is a corridor approximately 100 km wide that takes in both sides of the Portuguese–Spanish frontier, and whose length is delimited by a line joining Valença (Portugal) to Vigo (Galícia, Spain) in the northwest hinterland of the Atlantic coast, to one connecting Vilar Formoso (Portugal) and Fuentes de Oñoro (Castilla-León, Spain) in the central interior of the Iberian Peninsula.

Given that 'indoor' or sheltered prostitution, more precisely that taking place in the so-called clubs, is the predominant form in the particular area

where the research referred to in this article was conducted, it therefore constitutes the main empirical point of reference for our reflections.

Prostitution and the clubs where the sex trade is systematically undertaken is by no means a new phenomenon in the geographical area in question. What really constitutes a quantitative and qualitative break with the past is the fact that, over the past decade, there has been both a large expansion in number and an upsurge in the social visibility of such establishments.

Also completely new is the fact that, nowadays, prostitution in clubs is being fed, almost exclusively, by immigrant women, coming from various less developed countries, principally from Latin America. As a matter of fact, while our fieldwork turned up a few women from African countries, we detected few if any women of Iberian origin, or from other European nationalities (including Eastern European countries) working in these frontier clubs. Latin America has been the major provider of women who have come to work as prostitutes in clubs in these remote areas: Dominican, Ecuadorian, Colombian and, above all, Brazilian women dominate the 'club labour force' on both sides of the border.<sup>3</sup>

Our field research included the direct local observation of a total of 87 clubs; an extensive, structured questionnaire applied to around 200 women prostitutes, of which 10 were interviewed in depth.<sup>4</sup>

From among the many dimensions that, in general, prostitution involves and that our research explored, we have opted in this article to focus on a specific issue that is generally taken to be central to every type of prostitution – namely the problem of violence. We define violence in the very widest of senses (as did Bourdieu, 1999) – the act itself, its frequency and location, the means used to inflict it and the symbolism that is so often part of the process. Furthermore, we take it to mean any act or occurrence that, broadly speaking, aims to restrict or repress an individual's physical, psychological, intellectual and/or emotional development or integrity. Violence in its most varied forms, degrees and domains has been widely researched and amply referenced (for example, Alexander, 2001; Farley et al., 1998; Kinnell, 2001; Pisano, 2002) and, more specifically, has been recognized as something that permeates and integrates all types of relations that female prostitutes establish in the workplace during working hours – with clients, bosses, pimps and procurers, the police and with each other.

However, as we were able to observe during our research process, violence against women prostitutes also arises from many other sources, circumstances and situations that are external to the immediate contexts of the sexual work in which they are engaged and can assume many other forms than simply physical and sexual injuries. Despite its relevance and varied impact on women prostitutes' lives, the particular configurations and expressions of violence outside the workplace are far less well

studied and documented than violence that occurs as a direct concomitant of the sexual services transaction. As Agustín (2002b: 7) has remarked, very often, even 'those involved in projects [related to prostitution] hardly know anything about how sex workers live when they are not working'.

In this article we propose, therefore, to present and discuss evidence of the existence and the *modus operandi* of the type of violence against women prostitutes that manifests itself in and extends into other domains of prostitutes' non-work-related, or 'off-duty', daily lives.

## EVERYDAY FORMS AND EXPRESSIONS OF OFF-DUTY VIOLENCE

Based on our direct observation, the collection of data through in-depth interviews, questionnaires and the compilation of time-budgets,<sup>5</sup> we identified as the principal expressions of this type of violence the pervasive vacuity, monotony, claustrophobia and the social rejection inherent in the daily lives of women we contacted. This was particularly true in the case of those women for whom the club (or brothel) functioned both as workplace and residence.

From the service provider's perspective, 'indoor' prostitution has proven to be much safer than other forms, with risk and occurrence of violence at much lower levels than in street prostitution (Carrington and Betts, 2001; Farley et al., 1998; Kinnell, 2001; Price, 2001). Nevertheless, we would argue that violence – albeit with quite particular forms, characteristics and effects – is a factor of substantial importance in both informing and shaping the lives that the vast majority of prostitutes lead outside the workplace and working hours of their profession. Due to the mute, insidious and hidden nature of this violence, it is often neither recognized as such nor verbalized by the prostitutes themselves.

Our understanding is that the daily off-duty violence to which these women are subjected has largely to do with the following four aspects of their life and work:

1. The rootless pattern of employment that characterizes 'indoor' prostitution;
2. The frequent practice of working and residing in the same premises;
3. The nocturnal nature of the profession and the social consequences of the corresponding distribution of free time; and
4. The omnipresent stigma of being a prostitute.

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*From One Club to Another – Club-Based Prostitutes as Rootless Itinerants*

For almost all the foreign women who exercise prostitution in the clubs in the border areas covered by this research, arriving for the first time and beginning to work in either Spain or Portugal is a time of great trauma involving, as it undoubtedly does, not only a giant step (often into the unknown), but also an enormous effort in terms of adaptation to a new culture, different climate, unfamiliar food and the lack of the fallback support normally provided by friends and family.

Everything here was completely unfamiliar and made me feel so weird! Everything I'd left behind – my country, my people – began to mean so much to me! (Colombian woman, 28)

With these words, punctuated by uncontrollable sobs and tears, a recently arrived Colombian woman tried to explain what she felt as she began to work in the brothels of the border area between northern Portugal and Spain.

Due to the need of the clubs' owners to regularly renew the labour supply on the one hand and, on the other, the fact that many of the prostitutes are illegal or unregistered immigrants who opt to keep a low profile and remain undetected, women will tend to have only a short-term attachment to a particular club, in some cases the term being fixed in advance,<sup>6</sup> and in others, subject to assessments and decisions made from time to time either by the boss, or by the women themselves. Since the periods they spend in any one club are variable, and the work irregular, there tends to develop a more or less systematic and frequent 'rotation' of staff between the clubs throughout the border region. In most cases, it is the prostitutes themselves who decide to leave one club for another, as well as the time they remain in each of them (Ribeiro and Sacramento, 2002: 210).

This continuous wandering from club to club makes it particularly difficult for women to maintain and deepen any sort of friendship that might develop between them, or with third parties, or to enjoy any sort of a well-established non-work-related social life. This means that, to a great extent, their daily round is reduced to a continuously repeated succession of more or less superficial, spontaneous and fleeting contacts. For the most of these women, the human relationships they develop in their profession typically tend to be ephemeral, fragile, limited in extent, yet repetitive.

From my experience, that when you're on the game ['no mundo da putaria'] real friendships either just don't happen or happen very rarely. (Brazilian woman, 22)

The inevitable rotation of women between different workplaces has the effect of constantly changing the membership, yet renewing the scale and

composition of the female groups that share the same accommodation. This leads to the constitution of 'domestic' environments dominated by tensions and mutual distrust, and which, therefore, function on the basis of defensive strategies that are essentially individual and/or individualistically oriented. Due to the purposes, features and functioning of the housing they are forced to share, women look on their accommodation as merely transitory. Unable to personalize the spaces they are occupying as temporary guests, these remain devoid of any historical or relational reference to their own identity: as a 34-year-old Brazilian woman remarked, 'we never even get around to unpacking our cases'. For all these reasons, the women's accommodation constitutes one of the most visible faces of the social and emotional rootlessness that characterizes their daily lives. On the other hand, women constantly confront the unknown as a result of their itinerant circulation between clubs and between territories; as such, they are constantly assailed by fear, anxiety and the threat of their hopes and expectations being dashed – with particular intensity, as many interviewees confirmed, in the first weeks after arriving in Europe.

*The Undifferentiated Life Spaces of the Prostitute: Working and Living in the Same Establishment*

Club owners nearly always provide the women who work there with accommodation – either on the club premises, or less commonly in apartments or houses they either own or rent. In both situations, particularly when the women live in the building where they also provide sexual services, the accommodation fails to provide them with the necessary distance that allows it to function as a refuge in which they could extricate themselves – albeit temporarily – from the web of relationships in which prostitution involves them. On the contrary, the fact that accommodation is physically coterminous with one's workplace, or is controlled in one way or another by the club owner, confirms the spatial and temporal continuity that exists between workplace and 'home', increases the opportunities for one world to impinge on the other, threatens the minimal individual privacy that may exist, and exposes private space to interference and invigilation on the part of club owners and/or their henchmen.

The practice of requiring women to live and work either in the same building, or in facilities owned/controlled by the club owner, evidently restricts these women's individual liberty and autonomy to a significant degree, and imposes on them daily regimes that are highly regulated, and in which both transgressions and defiance are quickly discovered and punished.

There are clubs where, if you need to go to the hairdresser's, do some shopping or go to the doctor's, you have to ask the owner's permission. I worked in one where the boss actually fined me twice – 50 euros – just because I'd stopped in the street to say hello and chat with a friend. I don't know how he found out, but by the time I got home, he already knew everything I'd done while I was out! (Brazilian woman, 21)

The exercise of this type of control implies that, in the most extreme yet, admittedly, least frequent cases, bosses impose a wide range of constraints on the women that work for them, ranging from which doctors they can consult,<sup>7</sup> to the taxi drivers they may use.<sup>8</sup>

In many cases, the often total overlap between workplace, residence and the bosses' sphere of control means that women spend their non-working hours largely restricted to their accommodation. For many foreign women this confinement is even more accentuated due to their obvious need to maintain a low profile for fear of discovery by the authorities. Indeed, while bosses tend to use this same fact to justify the tight supervision under which they maintain their 'staff', the women themselves deploy the very same argument to explain why at times they impose upon their own movements the same or even more draconian restrictions.

I came to this city two months ago, but I hardly know it at all even now. As I don't have any papers, I'm really scared of being caught. I live with some other girls on the other side of the river in one of the boss's apartments, but I've never been to the city itself. I spend all my time at home: I sleep, watch TV – lots of TV – I read the horoscopes, phone my mother . . . and wait until the car comes to pick me up for work. I don't even go to the hairdresser's. I'm lucky my hair's naturally nice. (Brazilian woman, 22)

Furthermore, the fact that work and home are frequently coterminous and tend to function as extensions of each other inevitably means that these women share many of their non-working hours in the company of their work-mates. Clearly, this type of situation further strengthens the tendency towards the establishment and maintenance of closed circuits of communication, that in turn feed into the interpersonal conflicts, tensions and disputes that may already exist between one sphere and the other, ultimately making them more continuous, and consequently self-reinforcing.

For reasons that are fundamentally related to the competition for clients, relations between women working as prostitutes tend to be overlaid with generous doses of tension and conflict, and this has led some authors to conclude that 'usually, the "women of the night" see each other as enemies' (Oliveira et al., 2001: 27).

Notwithstanding its relevance, we should not conclude that competition and the interpersonal tensions that it generates are

restricted to the sphere of prostitution. However, in the concrete case of prostitution, the articulation of market competition and interpersonal conflict develops more complex contours. In the absence of the type of spatial or temporal discontinuities that arise from a clearer demarcation between the workplace and personal space, and which provide access to safe havens, escape zones and tension-reducing strategies that help to relieve the pressure generated by the more pronounced and problematic types of interpersonal clashes, there is a much greater potential and propensity for an upward spiral of misunderstanding and conflict between women. This type of situation is also conducive to an exaggerated emphasis being placed on particular individuals' most prominent characteristics or behavioural patterns, a tendency that is accentuated by the close physical proximity in a confined space to which many women are subjected and/or subject themselves. The high degree of circulation of women between clubs, which interrupts cohabitation and disrupts a given domestic environment, allows hostilities to be suspended – albeit temporarily – and retards the further development of spiralling conflict.

Both the prostitutes and club owners we interviewed repeatedly referred to the fact that violence forms a part of the everyday non-working lives these women spend in accommodation provided by their boss. The club owners also referred frequently to such conflicts, as a means of illustrating what they consider to be the innate incapacity of most women prostitutes to develop any sort of civilized personal behaviour or community life. They argued that it was in the women's own best interests that a strict and rigid regime be imposed, so as to 'protect them from themselves'.<sup>9</sup>

### *The Topsy-Turvy Daily Life of Club Prostitutes*

Prostitution in general and the activities of the 'indoor' prostitute, in particular, are a nocturnal phenomenon. As a general rule, the clubs are open from between 9.00 and 10.00 at night until around 4.00 in the morning on weekdays or 5.00 at weekends.<sup>10</sup> The working period is continuous and interruptions would only occur as a result of a lack of clients. As a general rule, women have to comply rigorously with this timetable.

If you're late, the boss starts shouting at you straight away! (Ecuadorian woman, 29)

In most establishments, women are allowed to take a day (or rather, a night) off once a week. For obvious reasons, days off correspond to slack periods, such as Mondays, and are totally prohibited at weekends.



Days off are controlled to a certain extent. You have to say in advance when you want one. It's never allowed at the weekend and, on top of that, you can't have the whole day off. But from Monday to Wednesday, you're free to choose which day you'll have off. (Brazilian woman, 35)

Nevertheless, many women said that they had either never, or only very rarely taken time off. Those that tend not to take time off say that this is due to the financial burden they took on at home in order to enter prostitution. Sometimes this refers to the income support they provide to their families back home, in other cases to debts they incurred before coming to Europe; there are also women who set themselves financial targets to achieve before they abandon the profession and return home.

I came to Europe with a very clear target in mind. I need to earn enough money to buy a house and provide a bit more comfort to my mother who is very sick. I didn't come here as a tourist, or just to play around. I'm here to work as hard as possible so as to reach my target as quickly as possible and go home again. I've got a fairly good idea of how much I need to earn. So every day I make a note of every cent I earn and every cent I spend. That way I can control and plan my life a bit better. (Brazilian woman, 21)

The number of hours women are required to work per day, and the fact that it is exclusively night work, along with the tension to be found openly or latently in the profession ensures that the 'daily' lives of the women concerned are almost completely socially disconnected. Indeed, the 'daily round' of women prostitutes is almost totally counter-cyclical in comparison to the lifestyle of most people: they work all night long, sleep through most of the daylight hours and are rarely if ever able to enjoy the weekend off that most people take for granted. In a society that is basically structured around the need to respond in a specific and differentiated manner to predominantly daytime working practices, the temporal working patterns of prostitutes are eccentric to say the least and in clear contrast to the dominant forms of socially distributing and using both time and space. This 'topsy-turvy' world almost always has pernicious effects, as some of the women we interviewed were able to confirm.

Even if I've had a good sleep, when I get up, I never really wake up fully. I feel half zonked most of the time. It's like I'm never totally conscious. I walk around as if I'm half anaesthetized. (Brazilian woman, 35)

The data collected from the time-budgets show that the non-working time of prostitutes i.e. *grosso modo* the period between the end of the night's work<sup>11</sup> and the time at which women go down to the bar at around 9.00 the following evening, in fact consists of a series of very routine occurrences, almost devoid of meaningful content, predominantly leisure-oriented and often focused on the preparations necessary for the night's

work. In brief, the club prostitutes who spend their days, weeks and months in this way experience a mere half-life conducive only to their further social and spiritual impoverishment.

The late mornings and early afternoons are taken up with dreaming. Most of the women get up at around 2.00 in the afternoon and immediately perform all the routine acts that characterize the start of anyone's day. Lunch is usually only taken after 3.00 in the afternoon. Most of the rest of the day is spent in their accommodation, doing nothing in particular, or 'relaxing' as many people called it: watching lots of TV – mainly Brazilian and Mexican soap operas that the Portuguese and Spanish stations broadcast in liberal doses, that in some way offer a brief virtual trip back home. They also listen to music, read romantic magazines and the like, or just 'chat with some work-mate or other' (Brazilian woman, 35). During the afternoon, they will also wash and iron some clothes, maybe dye and/or style their hair, or just do their nails. There may also be time to telephone relatives back home – some keeping in contact almost daily, others more sporadically. Remarking on the expense involved, a 35-year-old Brazilian woman joked – 'my mobile phone is my pimp!'

The direct and constant contact that these women maintain with relatives they left behind in their countries of origin not only serves to give concrete form to shared responsibilities and concerns, but also provides a very real means of substituting for the emotional contact, solidarity and support so often lacking in the eccentric lifestyle the profession imposes on them. The telephone is a means of sharing the pain, the failures, the little victories and happy moments out of which their daily round is constructed.

[If I have a problem] I don't talk things over with anyone here. I lock myself in my bedroom and cry. Or I phone my mother. (Brazilian woman, 31)

The time between lunch and dinner is also frequently occupied with little forays outside, almost always in groups, to go to the hairdresser's, the supermarket or a shopping mall, or just to have a coffee or a drink and pass the time in some local bar or cafe. Sometimes, as the fieldwork confirmed on numerous occasions, some prostitutes spend the afternoon out with a client with whom they have established a special, closer relationship, that in some cases approximates that of a regular boyfriend. Others revert to their chosen profession by doing a few 'extras' (as they call the 'tricks' they do outside the normal hours and locale of their work). These 'extras' are essentially to compensate for loss of earnings and to ensure that they are able to meet the income targets they have set themselves. Accepting these daytime tricks usually corresponds with periods of slack demand at the clubs where the women work, i.e. when, for whatever reason, fewer nocturnal clients put in an appearance.

On a working day, dinner – normally taken at around 8.00 in the evening – ends the club prostitute's non-working day. Now is the time to begin the preparations for a long night's work, which primarily involve the visual metamorphosis required by the profession and, in some cases, the little rituals that may offer some protection from the innumerable risks that the night affords, so familiar to all and experienced by most.

I light a candle and pray that Nossa Senhora de Fátima will protect me and that it'll be a good night. (Brazilian woman, 35)

Both the time-budgets we compiled and the direct observation that was undertaken during the fieldwork indicated that club prostitutes' daily periods of non-work do not involve a great deal of activity. The general atmosphere is dominated by a kind of lethargy and a certain degree of existential torpor, in which women essentially maintain the same network of relationships – albeit with some differences in intensity and nuances in form – that characterize their working hours. There are few gaps or discontinuities that, one way or another, might allow tensions to be released, anger assuaged, or conflicts resolved; consequently, there is little opportunity for the emergence of even slightly differentiated lifestyles that might help to restore equilibrium. On the other hand, as some of the interviewees remarked, the fact that non-working hours are passed in such a banal and sterile manner is conducive both to the invention of pretexts for arguments and the prosecution of the consequent disputes.

There are a lot of girls living here [in an apartment rented by the club owner]. Though some are better than others, there are arguments all day long! You wouldn't believe how much gossiping goes on. We're here all day with nothing to do – so what do you expect? (Brazilian woman, 24)

Faced with the excessive standardization, sedentarization and trivialization of their daily round of (in)activity and (inter)relationships, exacerbated and accentuated by the residential, social and existential confinement that multifaceted exclusion imposes on them, women prostitutes tend to regard their lives as both physically and mentally painful, violent and claustrophobic.

I never feel able to let myself go. (Brazilian woman, 20)

We don't live like other human beings – we just vegetate. I'm no animal. I want to get out of this line of work. (Brazilian woman, 27)

In some cases, women resort to alcohol<sup>12</sup> – and much less frequently drugs – as a means of coping with the repetitive and limited routine of their lives, in particular the long periods spent without anything meaningful to do.

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The daily round is hard for the women. That's why they often start drinking too much. (Club owner, 50)

From the preceding observations, it can be readily inferred that the profession exercised by the female club-based prostitute profoundly and decisively moulds the content of the time that is not filled by her work.

*The Omnipresent Stigma – Always and Only Prostitutes*

There are many other sources and manifestations of violence in the non-working lives of club-based women prostitutes, which take the form of more or less distinct practices of exclusion and/or marginalization that are most frequently associated, in the view of many of the women interviewed, with the stigma of prostitution. According to Goffman (1970), a stigma is a socially constructed pejorative attribute used to distinguish a given person such that his/her identity becomes configured primarily in terms of the characteristic imputed to him/her rather than on any other basis. Ramos (2000) argues that social exclusion is the corollary of stigma, with these two phenomena being articulated in the following way:

Emphasis is placed on characteristics that are presumably to the discredit of those possessing them [stigma], making it impossible for society to accept persons so identified [exclusion].

The majority of those who confided in us that they had been victims of discrimination against their professional activities identified personal humiliation as the most immediate and direct effect. They freely admitted that such experiences not only considerably eroded their self-esteem but were also extremely detrimental to the construction of any positive self-image. Our interviewees identified as directly associated with stigma, the following types of off-duty violence:

1. *Ostracism and rejection at home:* Neighbours in the apartment blocks where their bosses housed them reacted negatively in a number of ways, ranging from refusing to share the lift with them, to the organizing of petitions demanding that they leave their accommodation – typically referring to their occupation as the main source of discontent.
2. *Prejudice in public spaces:* Clients (in particular female clients) of some of the bars, cafes, shops and hairdressing salons frequented by prostitutes adopted attitudes based on prejudice. As a Brazilian prostitute (aged 27) remarked:

... in this city, people are really prejudiced. As soon as they hear the Brazilian accent, they start staring at us. Or they sit as far away as possible from us as if we were contagious.

To avoid, as far as possible, such manifestations of prejudice, particularly in the smaller frontier cities and towns whose characteristics are conducive to even more active and closer social control, prostitutes often patronize more modest establishments – especially cafes and restaurants – away from the urban centre, with a less affluent clientele, and where their presence is more readily tolerated or even openly welcomed, by owners and customers alike. This is yet another example of how the prostitutes' occupation and status further constrain the scope of their interaction with the rest of society, restricting them even more to a limited number of closed and frequently overlapping social and relational circles, making their daily round and their lives as a whole more claustrophobic than ever.

The pronounced degree and extent of the hostile attitudes and reactions encountered in off-duty prostitutes' social milieu fully justify the assessment made by a Barcelona prostitute, Carreras (2002), and echoed by most of the women to whom we talked, namely that 'what's hardest in this line of work is people's inability to understand, their intolerance and insults' (cited in gara.net, 2002).

#### ILLEGAL IMMIGRANT AND PROSTITUTE: THE CONVERGENCE OF TWO STATUSES IN THE CONTEXT OF OFF-DUTY VIOLENCE

Off-duty violence, in the circumstances and the forms we have identified in the earlier sections, emerges and flourishes where distinct yet mutually reinforcing factors intersect: some of these are quite specific to and inherent in the particularities of the local universe that were the object of our observation, while others are of a much more general nature. Among all these factors, however, we consider the most relevant for an understanding of the subject under analysis to be (1) that most of these women are illegal immigrants and (2) that their occupation and behaviour is generally seen as a form of deviance. In the two sections that follow, both these dimensions are examined in more detail.

#### *The Vast Majority of the Women Working as Club-Based Prostitutes in the Study Area are Illegal Immigrants*

Despite their many differences, the prostitutes we interviewed and we contacted during our fieldwork also have many characteristics in common, perhaps the most remarkable of which relates to their socio-economic origins. Almost all these women come from the poorest groups of the poorest regions of their less developed countries of origin, and almost all of them can be counted among the most deprived of the poor,

a fact that confirms the global trend towards the feminization of poverty. Given the socioeconomic precariousness of their lives in their countries of origin, and the extremely restricted range and scope of opportunities open to them to make a living, these women envisage prostitution in the world of the rich as the most immediately effective and accessible chance for dealing with the multiple, profound and urgent problems of material survival that they and their families (namely, their children) face.

The women interviewed most commonly cited the success stories of the women from their own localities who had preceded them as the most powerful factor fostering their own decision to travel<sup>13</sup> to the other side of the Atlantic – i.e. the classic demonstration effect. To put such a decision into practice, almost all of them could count on the help and the support of what might be called ‘small-scale informal networks’, that is, a sister, a friend, a neighbour, a relative that left before and is able to ‘arrange’, by themselves or through the intermediation of a club owner or manager, the financial means for them to come too. This implies that almost all of the women travelled ‘on credit’, almost always as ‘inflated debtors’,<sup>14</sup> nominally as tourists and yet knowing the real aim of their journey. Widely recurrent among Latin American women exercising this profession in the clubs along the border between the northern Portuguese and Spanish interiors, such a profile of recruitment and travelling confirms the thesis that the link between international migration and female prostitution does not develop solely as a result of women being coerced and/or duped into the profession, nor does it evolve exclusively under the aegis of international organized crime in general and human trafficking networks in particular (Agustín, 2000, 2002a; Casas, n.d.; Garaizábal, 2002; OIT, 1998; Robinson, 2002; STELLA, 2002).

Due to the particular historical relationships between Portugal and Spain and their former Latin American colonies, Brazilians benefit from a special status that allows them to travel to Portugal as tourists without a visa; the same facility of entry into Spain also applied, until quite recently, to many of the Spanish-speaking countries’ citizens. For many of these Latin American women, the possibility of arriving in Europe as mere tourists, i.e. broadly speaking as ‘legal immigrants’, has at least facilitated the first phase of their lives in Europe by making it possible to move without restriction throughout ‘the European space free of border controls’, even though entry is more and more scrutinized, surveyed and controlled by the increasingly suspicious authorities at European airports. As tourists, new arrivals are given an authorization to stay for a limited period of about three months. When this temporary permission expires, a few may return home, only to return later with a renewed permit for a further period of three months. But the majority opt to stay on and these women become illegal immigrants, an unavoidable status that is almost impossible to change, given the fact that it is out of the question for those

working as prostitutes to apply to legalize their status. In general terms, according to the current immigration laws of both countries, work and residence permits are closely dependent on the applicants' ability to show that they are in regular employment, that is, in short, to be in possession of a formal labour contract.

Despite the fact that both Portugal and Spain have decriminalized<sup>15</sup> the exercise of prostitution,<sup>16</sup> neither recognizes it as a legal occupation or professional activity for which a contract of employment can be signed, and on the basis of which a work permit could be issued. In a word, in both countries, the legislation reproduces the incoherence, ambiguity and contradictions found in the legislation of many other countries on this issue; that is, it neither really forbids prostitution nor really authorizes it<sup>17</sup> (Pryen, 1999). This situation forces most of the foreign women aiming to work in Europe as prostitutes to go clandestine after the expiry of the time limits defined by their tourist visas.

Their illegal status compels these women, along with all immigrants 'without papers', to adopt different strategies to avoid detection by police and other immigration officers, for the consequences of being caught would be repatriation and prohibition from returning for several years. To circulate freely, moving regularly from one of the numerous clubs in both countries to another and, exceptionally, to even include other countries in their peripatetic working lives, is the fundamental prerequisite for surviving, for as long as possible, as illegal immigrants

This process converts prostitutes into permanent migrants, who are constantly on the move (Agustín, 2002a; van der Helm, 2002): they simply cease to have a place to live, be it a house, a town, a country, and embark upon a nomadic, rootless, erratic way of life, made up of successive periods of just a few days' duration, spent in one town or other, lodging in an apartment somewhere and, of course, working in a given club. Throughout all this time the only permanent element is their suitcases: the sense of belonging, the personal attachment to a specific living and/or working context are suspended and tend to be replaced by a feeling of 'just passing through', corresponding closely to the more general feelings widely expressed by these women regarding their stay in Europe and in the sex trade. The transitory nature of their working lives clearly impacts on the forms and the content of how they use their off-duty time: it accentuates the perception that it is merely time spent waiting for the next move, an interval in which to do nothing, simply to be endured.

Moreover, in order to reduce the visibility of their presence and to diminish the chances of being detected as illegal immigrants, most of these women opt or, in some cases, are even obliged by the club owners and managers, to spend most of their off-duty time inside the houses or apartments where they are temporarily accommodated.

Obviously, their illegal immigrant status and all the surrounding



circumstances impose extraordinary limits on the choices available to them and inhibit their ability to use part of their spare time to take advantage of any opportunities for self-improvement in their lives as individuals and citizens.

Thus the immigration problem as a whole and, in particular, the ever more restrictive national policies regarding immigration, reinforced by the ambiguous status of prostitution, constitute one of the main frames of reference for a huge part of what we consider to be the insidious violence generally implicit in the day-to-day non-working lives of the foreign women linked to prostitution clubs.

*The Condition of Deviants: Stigmatization and Social Exclusion as Ideologically Repressive Constructions*

Much of the violence that manifests itself in the off-duty lives of women prostitutes is both directly and indirectly related to the predominantly negative ways in which society view and value commercial sex (Bindman and Doezeema, 1997: 3). The profound and extensive social exclusion that women identified as prostitutes generally experience proceeds from the pronounced stigmatization to which they are subjected (Pheterson, 1999: 1; Pons and Serra, 1998: 499).

In effect, commercial sex is taken as the only reference point around which society defines the identity and personal existence of women prostitutes (Briz, 2002). In April 1998, Gabriela Leite<sup>18</sup> had no hesitation in saying that,

The greatest violence inflicted on the prostitute is the prejudice against her activity and the stigma attached to it.

The stigma attached to the provision of sexual services for money functions as a powerful ideological and symbolic mechanism of repression and control over a way of life that does not conform to hegemonic social values and moral canons, and is therefore perceived as deviant. Prostitutes' predominantly commercialized sex-life diverges from institutionalized patterns and appears to constitute a 'disorder' with respect to society's established principles regarding sexuality and gender and consequently consigns them to the category of transgressors (Adelman, 2000). Since prostitutes' sexual behaviour is defined as both transgression and 'abnormal' and, as such, a danger and a threat to society, it is adopted as the sole characteristic of their social identity and constitutes the grounds and justification for society's systematic disapproval (Ericsson, 1980: 344).



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VIOLENCE AS BROAD-BASED REPRESSION – CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

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In prostitution, violence expresses itself transversally in a series of ways and, in particular, in the socially, legally and economically precarious – not to mention temporally ‘topsy-turvy’ – daily existence of the women who sell sexual services. Victims do not always understand what violent acts may entail for their autonomy and self-determination, nor the full extent of the personal damage that it may inflict on them. This is particularly true of symbolic violence, namely ‘that which is undertaken essentially using the purely symbolic means of communication and knowledge or, more precisely, of uncertainty and recognition or, *in extremis*, that of feeling’ (Bourdieu, 1999: 7). The specific form of violence that, in the case of prostitution, basically manifests itself in social stigmatization is grounded in systems of perception, appreciation and action, socially legitimized as somehow *inevitable, natural and basic*. In other words, it corresponds to what Bourdieu (1999: 29) refers to as ‘naturalised social construction’.

As our fieldwork has shown, violence in prostitution transcends the strict limits of the structural axis on which gender relations are founded, and very often, as it happens in the non-working situations, it lacks a directly and personally identifiable aggressor (supposedly the client and/or the pimp, procurer or brothel owner). It is, in fact, a faceless violence with only vaguely delineated outlines, which manifests itself much more at the psychosociological rather than the physical level, extending beyond the restricted context of sexual transactions and thoroughly permeating both the spaces and times supposedly reserved for the ‘off-duty’ activities of the women involved. In the interstices between the nocturnal periods in which the prostitute’s profession is exercised, diverse and prevalent forms of violence are to be found, ranging from social disembeddedness, spatial and physical seclusion, through inertia and the generalization of trivial off-duty routines, to stigmatization and social ostracism, all of which emerge, directly or indirectly, from the lifestyle that dominates and shapes the exercise of this profession. In contrast to what happens in working contexts, this type of violence tends to be almost socially invisible.

The extreme social stigmatization and exclusion imposed on women prostitutes (APDHA, 2002), as well as the legal precariousness of their immigrant and labour status, are the central and the most determinant factors underlying the configurations of their daily lives, especially with regard to the situations they experience in their non-work daily life. Clearly, where these constraints converge a set of circumstances are generated that are highly conducive to various distinct forms and expressions of violence, particularly the more subtle, subliminal and indirect violence

that pervades the off-duty, non-working hours of prostitutes, further subjecting them to moral, intellectual and psychological damage.

## NOTES

1. English translation by Chris Gerry and Audrey Gerry.
2. Project SAPIENS/99 (POCT1/36472/SOC) – 'Female Prostitution in Portuguese Semiperipheral Border Areas', undertaken by researchers of the Universities of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro (Vila Real), Minho (Braga) and Beira Interior (Covilhã).
3. The fact that the languages of the places of origin and destination are so similar is the most commonly advanced justification for the predominance of Latin American women in this occupation in the regions studied.
4. Besides these 200 women who were formally surveyed, the members of the research team had numerous shorter informal contacts with many more women who, for a variety of reasons, were unwilling to answer the questionnaire.
5. As the term suggests, a time-budget aims to calculate the use of the time people have at their disposal. In broad terms, the method involves compiling a register of how much time people devote to each of a given category of activity or task (Cain, 1977). In this specific case, women prostitutes were asked by an interviewer to recall and to enunciate, in a sequential manner, what they had done in the previous day, i.e. since they had awoken till they had gone to sleep again, including the number of clients they met.
6. Most commonly, a woman will stay 21 days, referred to in the profession as a *plaza* or 'term'.
7. In this regard, Anderson (2002) quotes a former prostitute who stated categorically that, in her own experience, the brothels 'discourage and in many cases forbid prostitutes to see doctors of their own choosing'.
8. The club owners' practice of monitoring women's behaviour beyond the limits of the workplace and the working relationship was even felt by the researchers during the fieldwork: the women we asked to fill in questionnaires or participate in interviews expressed over and over again their fear that the boss would find out, that he wouldn't like it, or wouldn't allow it, always with the assumption that the boss would be angry about their participation.
9. These comments are representative of the wider use of derogatory representations and a denigrating discourse by the great majority of the club owners and managers regarding the women that work there: they are viewed and portrayed as lesser beings – mentally and morally handicapped.
10. This timetable varies only very slightly between establishments on either side of the border and between the autumn, winter and spring and summer seasons.
11. Before going to bed, women usually eat a light supper and take a bath or shower, a procedure that has also a clear symbolic-ritual dimension, manifest in some of the comments made by interviewees, particularly those with the strongest sense of the social stigma attached to their profession: 'I can't get to sleep unless I've had my shower. I just have to scrub myself all over. It makes me feel as though I've cleansed my soul' (Brazilian woman, 26).

12. 'Alcohol may be employed as a means of overcoming stress and boredom (among prostitutes, for example)' (Montalvo and Echeburúa, 2001: 19).
13. The multiple constraints surrounding the acts and the processes – the material, political and ideological factors of the context, the structural inequalities, the system of power relations – should all be seen as intrinsic parts of the decision-making process.
14. They must repay double or even threefold the real costs of their journeys, and this constitutes one of the diverse forms of exploitation to which they are exposed in the club-based prostitution business.
15. That is, adult sex for commercial gain is not considered against the law.
16. In this sphere, the law only considers (1) incitement to prostitution and (2) the exploitation of women prostitutes by third parties for profit (pimping) to be crimes.
17. With regard to the typology of 'classical' approaches to national prostitution legislation that can be identified in the literature, namely prohibitionist, abolitionist and regulatory (see APDHA, 2003; Mestre, n.d.; CLES, 2002; Garaízabal, 2002; Danna, 2003), current Portuguese and Spanish legislation corresponds, in general terms, to the second.
18. Leader of the Rio de Janeiro prostitutes' movement and president of the NGO DaVida.

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